

The Passing of an American Hero
By Rep. Stephanie Herseth Sandlin

This week, we mourn the passing of an American hero, Clarence Wolf Guts. Clarence Wolf Guts, the last surviving Lakota code talker from World War II, was laid to rest in Black Hills National Cemetery after a traditional Lakota funeral in Wanblee on Monday June 22, 2010. I had the distinct honor of knowing Clarence and was privileged to meet him. With his passing we take a moment to honor and remember the life of a man who contributed not only to the history of South Dakota but also to history of the United States.

Clarence Wolf Guts was a quiet hero who never asked for recognition or profited from his experiences. In 1942 he joined the Army and was quickly recruited by Major General Paul Mueller, commander of the U.S. Army's 81st Infantry to translate vital communications in order to protect our sensitive military information – and protect American lives. The Japanese never broke the Lakota code which helped ensure success of American forces in the Pacific.

Along with Senators Tim Johnson and John Thune, I supported a bill to award Clarence and the other forgotten Lakota code talkers the Congressional Gold Medal, an award given to Navajo code talkers in 2000. I enjoyed spending time with Clarence during his visit to Washington with South Dakota Indian leaders, including Don Loudner, the national commander of the American Indian Veterans Association of the United States, to testify for the legislation. This was an overdue honor, but so well-deserved.

As I reflect upon Clarence's life and his legacy this week, I recalled a statement he made years ago about soldiers and their thoughts of home: "When I see young children playing without any supervision, I realize why we were over there ... we did not want the enemy to come over here to America, because we love America."

With the passing of this great hero we say goodbye to the last of a brave group of men who served our country honorably, and we are poignantly reminded of those currently wearing the uniform and serving under the same flag as Clarence Wolf Guts and the Lakota code talkers.